

'Mom and Me' camp lets kids, inmates stay close



Volunteer Bill Ducett, inmate Autumn Boastick and her daughter Sarah Boastick, 7, and other inmates and their children play a game with a parachute and beach balls during the Mom and Me Camp at the Decatur Correctional Facility Tuesday. Herald & Review, Jim Bowling

August 8, 2014 By CASSIE BURTON H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR – On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, 16 children stepped off a school bus and walked into prison.

The children, age 7 to 12 years old, were campers of East Bay Camp who rushed down the hallways to see their mothers, 13 Decatur Correctional Center inmates, as part of the annual “Mom and Me” Camp.

“It's a really awesome camp for Garrett because he can interact with other kids and open up,” said inmate Brianne Buss, 26, about her son Garrett, 8, one of the campers. “It's amazing how much he's matured. Plus I get to see him three days in a row.”

The Methodist camp is cost-neutral, accepts no government money and hit its record number of 48 children this year, 16 of whom visited the Decatur branch for the eighth year. The others went to see their moms at Logan Correctional Center, in its 13th year.

“We saw a need for kids to spend more time with their mothers,” said Marilea White, a volunteer for East Bay who has been with the “Mommy and Me” camp since it started.



*Inmate Helen Lares receives a hug from her son Kwenton Moore,9, while the two prepare to make a memory book together during the Mom and Me Camp at the Decatur Correctional Facility Tuesday.
Herald & Review, Jim Bowling*

The Methodist church works with the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago to transport children from the Chicago area to the Bloomington-based East Bay camp. The camp staff is composed of 56 volunteers.

“It's really nice to come see my mom and play games with her, and get on her back sometimes,” said Kynzee Boastick, 12.

Kynzee and her sister, Sarah, 7, saw their mother, Autumn Boastick, an inmate of the facility who will be released in about three years.

“We talk about why I am here and what I'm going to do differently when I come home,” Autumn Boastick said. “I like the crafts part because it's easier to talk to them and catch up.”

The campers and inmates participate in activities like crafts, board games and gym time so as to let them talk, play and create a picture book.

“It's exciting because I never thought I'd be able to do something like this in prison,” said Alicia Kee, while her children D'Angelo, 10, and Heavenly, 11, sat close by. “We were close before I left, so to get to do this and stay close is amazing.”

It's not unusual for children and moms to take turns fixing each other's hair, and many of the chairs are left empty in favor of mothers' laps.

“We have time to spend with the kids and do activities,” said Anieka Johnson, whose 7-year-old came. “You get to do more than when they come visit you.”



Inmate Brianne Buss carries her son Garrett Buss, 8, while starting snack time during the Mom and Me Camp at the Decatur Correctional Facility Tuesday. Herald & Review, Jim Bowling

The prison's administrative assistant, Steve Spaide, said that the volunteers and prison staff try to let the inmates interact freely, as normal visits only span two hours.

“It's like you're home a little bit,” said Chastina Mayes, whose youngest son, Dion, visited her. “Your guardian of your child is not there, so it's just you and him.”

It's the last year that Dion, 12, will see her through the "Mom and Me" camp, although his location allows him to visit often.

"I just want to thank them for letting me see my mom and do this stuff with her," Dion said.

Some of the inmates are on the E-wing, which allows for a reunification program and more communication opportunities between mothers and their children. Others are not.

"The fact that they come for three days is great, and he can talk to other kids whose moms are also in prison," said Helen Lares of her son Kwenton, 9. "I just like being with him without a visit limit."

Unlike other visits, Lares gave all of her attention to Kwenton, as his sister is 6 and not yet old enough to participate in the camp.

"It's good for him because this way he can get a little extra attention," Lares said. She said she enjoys seeing Kwenton indulge in one of his passions: basketball. "I can't when I'm incarcerated. I miss that."



Left: Inmate Carissa Burke has her braided by daughter Kailee Schultz, 9, as inmate Norma Carroll has her hair braided by daughter Julia Ducey, 7, during the Mom and Me Camp at the Decatur Correctional Facility Tuesday. **Right:** Inmate Carissa Burke shows affection to Kailee while playing together, as inmate Norma Carroll and Julia look on. *Herald & Review, Jim Bowling*

At the end of each day, the children drive back to East Bay Camp, where they participate in other activities like swimming or fishing. On the third day, the all-volunteer staff shows a video of pictures of the children and their mothers before the children leave for the third time and return home.

(Story concludes on next page)

It's a tradition that White, Warden Shelith Hansbro and Spaide hope to continue. Spaide said it is part of an effort to keep the bond between mother and child alive, to prevent the mother from returning and to reduce the chances of her child following in her footsteps.

“Sometimes Mom come back and they haven't talked to their kids very much, so they can't walk through the door and pick up where they left off,” Spaide said. “We're hoping this helps. We see moms and grandmas and daughters all come through. This is a way to break the cycle.”